

TOUGH LOVE

At some points in my early life I learned the hard way about doing the wrong thing. I learned that if you crayoned on the walls or stole the cake that was intended for the visitors you were likely to be told off for it. If you tried to cover it up and pretend it was your older brother, it was worse. I wasn't very good at convincing people it was someone else's fault.

There were moments when I would deserve the rebuke but lie on my bed feeling that nobody loved me or else they wouldn't be bothered; there were moments of telling my mother to go away when she came to talk to me later on.

Of course the fact was that my mother did love me- that was the very reason she didn't let me get away with things when they were wrong or pretend they didn't matter. That was the very reason she came back to me to try to persuade me, after I'd suffered the hurt, that she still loved me; that was the reason she was willing to be told to go away by the person she cared for.

It's a loving parent who tries to lead children the right way and who suffers as well when they go wrong and have to be led back to the right path. It's a kind of tough love- being cruel to be kind...

It's also God's way: God loves so much that he wants the best. It's why he was ready to suffer himself and risk rejection in being ready to die for us in Jesus when our sins really deserved punishment. Yes he wants us to change our ways, recognise our faults and turn back from them but he also faces suffering and the risk of rejection at every turn when he judges what's wrong. We don't like to think of God as a judge and yet, if he did not judge, there would be no distinction between good and evil, I would be sharing heaven with those who have committed appalling evil and thought nothing of it and Jesus' death would just have been a costly mistake.

Here is the apostle Paul, suffering the rejection and hurt of the people of the Corinthian church, because he dared to write a letter which told them they had been too tolerant of bad behaviour. People are very divided over working out

what the original problem had been but clearly Paul thought it was serious enough that it wouldn't be brushed under the carpet and forgotten about.

He had written about it and it upset them. He didn't come and shout, but he did write something that caused hurt. Who likes to have their faults shown up? When you think you're doing alright you don't want someone daring to tell you that you're not. So it seems as if there had been some hurt and anger and the Corinthians had 'flounced off to their bedroom' as it were, and told him to Go Away! It's not fair. You don't love us. You've taken advantage, preached your message and now you're upsetting us.

There are two ways that things can turn out if you're told off: you can grit your teeth and determine not to accept it, convincing yourself you're not wrong and how dare he.... or you can calm down and think about it. If you think hard enough, it can make you want to prove something about yourself. It may be that you feel determined to prove your innocence (someone got the facts wrong); it may be that you feel determined to prove you can change. Sometimes I have been so sure of my being right and then been pulled up short, thought a bit and seen things differently. I've felt ashamed and had to try to change. That's what Paul has seen.

Read v.8-11

We live at a time when parents are under pressure – let children choose: what they want to do/eat/wear....don't hurt them in your discipline; sometimes people don't discipline them at all because the idea is they find out how to live by what consequences they meet.

But Paul wants the best for them. He wants to be a proud parent showing off children of good character to God.

So it's a really poignant plea – don't shut us out. Open your hearts wide...

Do you love people enough to want their best, even if it means causing hurt to get the good result? Even if it means risking being rejected? That's hard, because we want to be liked and loved ourselves.

This is full of touching moments – the comfort that comes from knowing people care (v.7) The encouragement which comes from hearing good things about the Corinthians, even when he's in trouble it makes a difference (v.4) The longing for Paul and his friends to have a place in the Corinthian hearts (v.2)

If we understand any of what that means to us, then we should pray that God will make us similar people- taking risks in love to hold people to the best, taking it when we are pushed away, being ready to open our hearts and hope that others will open theirs to us, too.